

Ambassador Ray's Speech
to Commemorate Martin Luther King, Jr.
Friday, January 15, 2010, 11:15 a.m.
Prince Edward School

Good morning and thank you for the kind introduction.

First, I would like to recognize and thank Kevin Atkinson, Headmaster of Prince Edward School, invited guests, and friends.

I would also like to recognize the students of Girls High School, Queen Elizabeth High School, Allan Wilson School, and of course, the students of our host Prince Edward School.

This Monday, January 18, is a special day for Americans and people around the world. It is the day we reflect upon, honor, and pay tribute to one of America's greatest leaders, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

Dr. King was a man whose spirit, vision, and ideals were extraordinary. You can't really talk about civil rights without mentioning the accomplishments of Dr. King. His leadership and tireless efforts to shine a powerful light on injustices faced by people of color in the United States over 50 years ago led to some of the most important changes to American law and society.

When I was growing up, regardless of your education, how much money you had, or any other qualifications, if you were not white, you were considered and treated as a second-class citizen.

When Dr. King appeared on the scene, it was for many of us who lived in the South, like a sign from heaven that things were changing. We could follow his example, hold our heads up with pride, and show that no one had cause to look down on us.

You students here are probably too young to know how that feels, but I'll bet your parents or older relatives know exactly what I'm talking about.

I'll give you an example: I joined the army in 1962, and in 1965 I was commissioned as a second lieutenant – the first person from my hometown, of any color, to receive such an honor. After being trained as a paratrooper a few years later, after I'd been promoted to first lieutenant, I was on my way to an assignment in North Carolina when I stopped in a small town in Mississippi to buy food.

I was in uniform, but it made no difference to the man who ran the ratty little snack stand on the highway. I had to go to the window marked "Colored" to pay the same amount for the greasy food he served to whites across the front counter. When I said "No thank you, I'll eat later somewhere else," he called the police to make me pay for food he hadn't even cooked yet.

You don't forget such experiences. You learn from them. Later in life, as I thought about the incident, I felt sorry for this poor, ignorant soul, who thought he was doing the right thing, and was not about to break social customs – no matter how unjust or stupid – even for someone who was serving the country that he would no doubt swear he loved.

As a soldier and a diplomat for many years, I have learned the importance of understanding history in order to better understand the present and plan for the future. So let's take a moment to look back in history.

Today, I will tell you about how Dr. King became a leader and how his actions changed the fabric of society in the U.S.

I will discuss what civil rights are, and how Dr. King supported them so tirelessly. And when I'm done today, I hope you will leave here understanding why civil rights are so important to building and maintaining a strong democracy and a productive society. Finally, I will talk about Dr. King's legacy, what he left behind as a result of his passion and perseverance for the causes of equality and freedom for all.

Are we together now?

Handeyi! (Hand day yi) (Translation - Let's get going! or Moving on!)

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was born in 1929 in Atlanta, Georgia. His mother was a schoolteacher and his father was a Baptist Minister. Dr. King grew up in what we call "the South," which is the southern United States.

As a young man in the 1950s, Dr. King was exposed to racism and segregation. The laws in the South at that time were supposed to provide "separate but equal treatment" for blacks. But separate cannot be equal.

Let me tell you about my experience in a "separate but equal" school system in Texas in the 1950s. The white school got the new books and equipment, and the black school that I attended got their cast offs.

It was only in 1958, when they finally replaced our worn out, wood frame school house with a brick building and introduced geometry and physics into the school system that I had new books to study, and equipment that hadn't been well-used by white students.

The “separate but equal” system was certainly separate, but never equal.

Imagine you are Dr. King, growing up in Atlanta. Your parents wake up and get on the public bus to go to work, but they have to ride in the back of the bus while the whites ride in the front.

You are not allowed to go to school with whites.

As an African-American, you are not allowed to go to certain restaurants or use the same bathrooms as whites. African-American athletes were not permitted to play professional sports.

African-Americans were often severely restricted in exercising one of the most basic and fundamental rights, a right we as Americans cherish most dearly, the right to register and be eligible to vote.

This was the reality that Dr. King grew up in, so he knew firsthand about injustice and inequality.

I already told you about some of my experiences. So I won't bore you with other stories of the indignities I had to endure growing up in a country that had not yet learned to do as Dr. King said - judge people by the content of their character rather than the color of their skin.

I never knew him personally, but I've come to know some of the people who were close to him, and they all say that he was true to his beliefs. From him though, I learned some important lessons. Don't hate your oppressor; pity him, and return love for his hate. Learn that the most powerful weapon you possess is your ability to forgive, and to love.

Dr. King's teachings, along with the common sense wisdom I learned from my grandmother who raised me, have made it possible for a young boy from a poor, very small farm in the poorest part of Texas to stand before you today as the representative of the President of the most powerful country on earth.

It made it possible for me to set goals for myself that when I was growing up I was told were impossible for one of my race to achieve.

I regret that I did not get the opportunity to get these lessons from him directly, but they are no less powerful and meaningful for having been received second-hand. As a well known black American entrepreneur once said, it doesn't matter if your clothes are second-hand, as long as you don't have holes in your pocket to hold your money.

The time from 1950 to 1970 was a period ripe for dramatic change in civil rights, as we will see. The South resisted integration, but there were pressures forcing change.

One was the return of one million African-American servicemen who fought in World War II. They returned home to the United States, after risking their lives to defend their country, and they demanded equal treatment. They were willing to stand up for their rights.

Dr. King was by all accounts a brilliant student, attending university at age 15 and eventually graduating with university degrees in Sociology and Divinity and a doctorate in Theology. After going to school in the North, he decided to return to the South and in 1954 became a preacher in Montgomery, Alabama.

In 1955 something interesting happened in Montgomery. That something started small, but turned out to be a defining moment in the Civil Rights Movement. On December 1, 1955, in Montgomery, an African-American woman named Rosa Parks, got on a bus and took a seat in the first row of the black section of the bus.

Rosa Parks was an activist, which is someone who will take “action” for an important cause. Rosa Parks had worked a long, hard day as a seamstress and did not want to give up her seat. She was polite, but firm. She had paid the same amount as the other passengers. It was unjust for her to be forced to stand so a white man could sit, so she simply refused.

Rosa Parks knew it was time to insist on her rights.

Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat.

Rosa Parks was arrested for not giving up her seat.

Four days later, the leaders of the African-American community in Montgomery formed an organization called the Montgomery Improvement Association. They organized a boycott of all the buses in Montgomery to bring attention to unjust and discriminatory segregation. A boycott is a good example of what is called non-violent protest or resistance. A boycott is a way of saying, “We won’t buy or use your product or service until you change your ways.”

The organization needed a president, someone whom the community respected.

Dr. King was a young, brilliant preacher at an influential church.

Dr. King was an ideal candidate. Dr. King took the job. Dr. King led the boycott and African-Americans in Montgomery refused to ride the buses for more than a year.

During that year, Dr. King gave speeches and negotiated with some very difficult city leaders who didn't support desegregation. While this was happening, the segregation of buses was challenged in the court system.

Finally, the highest court in the United States found that the segregation was unconstitutional, and forced the city of Montgomery and cities across the nation, to desegregate the buses.

Dr. King led this non-violent movement knowing that non-violent protest does not mean the change will also be peaceful. Dr. King's house was bombed and shot at. He was arrested about 20 times and assaulted at least four times.

But he endured these attacks against himself and his family because he wanted to take a stand against oppression in a way that showed his Christian ideals and his belief in non-violent protest.

Although Dr. King started this movement in Montgomery as a protest against segregation on buses, it wasn't long before people all across America had seen and heard him.

With a majority of Americans owning televisions for the first time in the 1950s, people could not only hear but see a young, articulate, charismatic, African-American leader communicate the need for equality.

People also saw for the first time African-Americans being beaten by police for simply sitting at a restaurant while taking part in a non-violent protest called a “sit-in.” They saw preachers being handcuffed and taken to jail for leading peaceful marches. They saw people being attacked by police dogs. They also saw Dr. King communicating with compassion and eloquence to everyone about these gross injustices.

And in part because his message was so clear, strong, and just, Americans demanded change. His call for freedom brought Americans of all colors and backgrounds to the South to fight shoulder-to-shoulder with African-Americans for the cause of equal rights for all.

In 1963, Dr. King and other civil rights leaders led more than 250,000 people in a peaceful march in Washington, DC.

It was at this march that Dr. King delivered a speech thought to be one of the greatest speeches in the history of America. Dr. King began his speech by saying:

"I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal."

The speech is called “The March on Washington Address,” but Americans and people around the world know this speech as the “I Have a Dream Speech,” because he speaks about his dreams of freedom and equality for all.

It is a speech that brings tears to the eyes, warms the heart, and raises the spirit. It is a speech that teaches tolerance in the face of oppression. Dr. King also said in this speech:

“Let us not seek to satisfy our thirst for freedom by drinking from the cup of bitterness and hatred.”

He knew how hate could prevent, on both sides, the healing needed to make civil rights laws successful.

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. faced opposition from a wide range of groups for his efforts to change. Some of these people were even prominent black leaders in the Civil Rights Movement. There was a Black Power movement which advocated violence as a means of achieving freedom and equality. Dr. King did not agree with that movement’s beliefs, saying:

“A doctrine of Black Supremacy is as evil as White Supremacy.”

Dr. King demonstrated beyond doubt the power of non-violence as a way to illuminate injustice. He showed that the way to overcome those who have power is to use their own power against them. Violence left unopposed has a way of reflecting back upon the aggressor. It worked for King, and the world is a better place for it.

Unfortunately, at times greatness comes with paying the ultimate price.

Dr. King was assassinated on April 4, 1968, but he left behind a tremendous legacy. Perhaps Dr. King's most important achievement was the beginning of the end of inequality. With better incomes through fair labor practices, African-Americans can send their children to college and better exercise their right to vote.

Dr. King's achievements paved the way for integration at the highest levels of office today as the United States President, Barack Obama, the son of a black African father and a white American mother leads us in our ongoing struggle for freedom and equality.

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was truly gifted in his ability to communicate important ideas. I leave you with what I consider to be important ideas based on Dr. King's ideas for creating and maintaining civil rights for people across the world:

When one person's rights are taken away, all rights are diminished.

And

When one man is enslaved, no man is free.

And finally one of Dr. King's most memorable quotes, something that may be especially important as you continue to grow and mature into adulthood:

"The ultimate measure of a man is not where he stands in moments of comfort and convenience, but where he stands at times of challenge and controversy."

Thank-you.